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A New Adventure

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A NEW ADVENTURE

Some students choose an alternate path to college after experiencing the real world

BY VARAD DIWATE DESIGN ALIXANDRIA COLLINS

Jeff Haacke was furious after the first day in class.

Haacke used to commute from Urbandale for school and work a part-time job there. He had to attend a mandatory orientation class in the afternoon on the first day of classes of a new semester.

He was scheduled to work that day and would not be able to attend this particular class session. He explained he would have to take time off from work and asked if he could follow up over email or attend the class over webcam. But that was not going to work.

"She was dead set on me showing up, saying it was a requirement — I had to show up. She was inflexible."

He ended up taking time off work and drove up to Ames. The instructor for his class walked in, read the syllabus for about 15-minutes and walked out.

"There wasn't even attendance [taken]. If I had not showed up, she wouldn't even know!" Haacke says.

"Those are the kinds of issues non-traditional students are really frustrated with," says Haacke, senior in management information systems and supply chain management.

Haacke is just one of the many current students at Iowa State who did not follow the traditional path to college — leaving

high school at 18 to pursue a degree for your lifetime. The paths leading to a college degree for these students are different, and so are their experiences in college.

Along with attending school, these students usually have something else going on in their lives, says Darlene Fratzke, coordinator for the Adults and Non-Traditional Students Learning Community at the College of Human Sciences. This learning community is a support and social group for non-traditional students.

The term "non-traditional students" includes those commuting, married, raising children or serving in the National Guard. This category also includes students coming back to school after a long time.

"If they have been out for a while, learning to study again is a challenge," Fratzke says.

Iowa State does not have an official count of non-traditional students as the criteria for being a non-traditional student are far-ranging and not tracked by university records. According to the Office of Registrar, the number of adult students, aged 25 and above stands at 1540, or five percent of the total undergraduate enrollment. This number by itself is not inclusive of all non-traditional students.

Some non-traditional students shared their experiences of coming to Iowa State and spending their time on a campus dominated by 18-22 year olds.

STUDENTS' STORIES

"I guess I didn't put as much emphasis on school and grades as I do now."

JEFFREY HAACKE, 32, SENIOR IN
SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT AND
MANAGEMENT INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Jeff Haacke says he now has a "professional approach" to college during his pursuit of a second degree. He sees college as a stepping stone to professional success rather than as a rite of passage after high school.

"The first time around, I didn't really know what I wanted to do...it was something expected from my family and high school. You get a four-year degree in something and after that you'll have a great job," he says. "Obviously that's not what ended up happening."

Haacke graduated with a degree in political science from the University of Iowa in 2006. He worked for six years before coming back to school. After graduation, he worked in AmeriCorps VISTA, a federal program that aims to eradicate poverty, and at a banking firm. He also worked as a concierge, then supervisor at an upscale retirement home.

With his first degree, Haacke says he found that it was hard to find a worthwhile career opportunity unless he worked for the federal government or lived in Washington DC. During an internship in college, he had a chance to see what it would be like.

"I was in DC and started seeing what I could be doing, because I wanted to work on the Hill for a congressman or senator. It really turned out that what I was getting into, I didn't enjoy as much as I thought I was going to," Haacke says. So, he kept looking at opportunities closer to home.

During a short gig for an insurance company, he realized he needed to go back to school to advance his career.

Haacke talked to his brother who works in the IT sector and also talked to advisers at Iowa State. He decided to go for a degree in management information systems to complement his background in project management. He was also attracted to the ever-changing nature of computer technology.

He started taking classes at Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) to complete his prerequisites in fall 2013. Once at Iowa State, he also added supply chain management as his second major as it was going to take just one additional semester.

The financial aspect of going back to school again was also a bit different for Haacke.

"Since I was out in the real world working and saving money, that wasn't as much of an issue for me as it might be for some other people," Haacke says. "It was definitely nice to be able to get scholarships to pay for my tuition here."

It was the beginning of a new journey at a new school.

"One thing I really enjoyed was coming back to a college campus and getting the hopeful vibe," he says. "At first it was pretty strange when I was on average 10 years older than the students in class. It definitely took some time to adjust to it."

The social aspect of college now looks a lot different to him as a non-traditional student. Haacke says he now usually ends up going out with a smaller group of people closer to his age and doesn't stay out as long. He ends up meeting quite a few people through group projects and involvement with clubs. "It doesn't seem that they mind that I am a lot older than they are," he says with a chuckle.

Given his background, Haacke had to transition into his new major with a technical focus.

The transition from a full-time job to being a college student was not difficult for Haacke as he was used to long hours, deadlines and assignments. Additionally, his goals are different the second time in college.

"I guess I didn't put as much emphasis on school and grades as I do now. But hindsight is always 20/20," he says. "I have definitely excelled while I have been here. It has been a positive experience."

Haacke plans to work as a business analyst after graduating in May 2016.

“I just kind of thought, ‘I have a degree
and I’ll get a job.’ That’s not true!”

JILL GYULAFIA, 29, SENIOR IN
SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT AND
MANAGEMENT INFORMATION SYSTEMS.

“I guess I didn’t really have things figured out when I was 21. I thought I was going to go to grad school for medical illustration,” says Jill Gyulafia. Originally from Kansas, Gyulafia was pursuing a bachelor’s degree in studio art from Baker University. That was the plan until senior year, when she came to know the program at her university was not accredited.

To pursue her plan, she would have to go back to an accredited school for the same degree. So, she decided against this option after graduating in 2008.

After graduating, she took the first job she could find at a community college bookstore. She worked at the store for three years and at a clothing retail store for two years. She felt her work wasn’t challenging enough and wanted to do something that would offer her better employment opportunities in the future.

That led her to the decision to come back to college for another degree. Even though it was largely her decision, friends and family supported her. She took an online quiz which found that logistics would be a good career option for her. Gyulafia’s primary major, supply chain management is closely related to this field. After talking to employers at a career fair, she added MIS as a second major.

It was eventually a question of almost doubling her student debt and spending a few more years in college. She talked with a financial aid counselor to understand this option better.

“I’ll have a substantial amount of loans when I graduate, but I feel the majors I have chosen will allow me to have a good salary,” she says.

She started taking general education classes at DMACC in fall 2013. After two semesters,

she transferred to Iowa State and enrolled in her current program in fall 2014. During her time here, she has taken classes just in her majors.

“It was intimidating...I had never taken a business class before. Accounting made me nervous because I am not good with numbers,” Gyulafia says about her transition to a new major. However, this changed after her first semester at Iowa State. “I did pretty well. I realized, ‘Oh! I can do this. It’s hard work, but this is worth it.’”

Coming to college for the second time has given Gyulafia a different outlook.

“I never really considered that I needed to make an extra effort to get a job. I just kind of thought, ‘I have a degree and I’ll get a job.’ That’s not true!” Gyulafia says. “I definitely have a better attitude of being a student this time around. I learned my lesson — you need to have a good GPA. You need to work really hard to get that internship.”

So far, she has been able to make friends with mostly other non-traditional students. “I just try to blend in. I think a lot of people don’t realize that I am non-traditional or as old as I am,” she says. As for challenges, Gyulafia says she had to get used to being a student again with attending classes, doing homework and working on projects.

She has had at least one experience which reminded about her alternate path to college.

“While interviewing and applying for jobs, I have had someone make a comment... ‘Oh! You are non-traditional. I don’t discriminate!’ during a pre-interview social. That kind of made me think if that had been a factor for other employers and recruiters — are people taking that into consideration?” She says this was not something she anticipated.

Gyulafia is looking forward to graduating after the fall 2016 semester.

“The first time around, I didn’t really know what I wanted to do... it was something expected from my family and high school. You get a four-year degree in something and after that you’ll have a great job, obviously that’s not what ended up happening.”

“I would have rather, hands down, gone to college not knowing anything than what I know now.”

EVAN ZERBY, 36, SENIOR IN GEOLOGY

As someone who has worked and managed a business for several years, Evan Zerby says at times it is difficult to relate textbook concepts to what he had already seen in real life.

“I have really struggled in school because of that. I can get the answer, but not the way they want me to do it. I couldn’t do things the “freshman way,” he says. “I would have rather, hands down, gone to college not knowing anything than what I know now.”

Zerby is a super-super senior in Geology. He says he has been around for so long as he “easily gets side-tracked by research projects.” He has spent about three semesters on research projects.

Born on the Kansas State University campus in Manhattan, Kansas, Zerby grew up with technology around him. His father worked in university facilities for more than four decades which gave Zerby an opportunity to explore research on campus. Talking with researchers, he got interested in science and research.

Zerby is also interested in custom cars, space exploration and anything that has to do with making things using his hands. This is evident in his garage which doubles as a workshop for his house remodeling project.

As a teenager, he was drawn to car-stereos and eventually custom cars. He started his business in 1998 at the age of 19. He started a retail shop which bloomed into a location frequented by enthusiasts and athletes. He later started designing concept cars.

He was doing well financially. However, he was also looking for something more.

“By then, my heart was not in it as much as it used to and I was looking for something different,” he says.

“Even though I made unbelievable money at the time, there still wasn’t the respect that I do [have] now because I didn’t have a college degree. I was a nobody because I didn’t have a degree,” he says. “I decided what I needed to do what was come back to school and get the prestigious paper — the diploma that said I knew what I had already done.”

He looked at college options and decided on Iowa State as he already knew a friend who worked here. He says when he first got to ISU campus in 2008, he definitely got a lot more “weird looks.”

He started off in software engineering with a geology minor. He eventually changed his major to geology.

Given his background, Zerby has his views on the role of college education. “Maybe I am being political for a moment here, that’s part of the problem with the world,” he says. “For generations now, we as the society have taught people that if you get your hands dirty, it’s not as respectable if you don’t,” he says while aligning two blocks of wood to make a small door.

Today, while attending school, he also runs a business for custom designed parts. He looks forward to graduating in summer 2016 and working with something that would allow him to merge his interests — remote exploration, space robotics and related fields.

CHALLENGES

As part of the non-traditional students community, Haacke knows other students and their diverse challenges. “People who are a little older may have some reservations about how they interact with people who are a lot younger than they are. Especially so with using computers and other technical aspects,” he says.

Another issue is making older students comfortable in a class mostly filled with young people.

“I think part of it is not to constantly remind the students how old you are and that you are a non-traditional student,” he says.

Haacke says universities should be looking at being more flexible to non-traditional students — especially those married, with families or other jobs. He says, “School is a priority but it might not be the number one priority.” Flexible could mean accommodating students who are once in awhile late due to other commitments. Or understanding students who commute to school from far-away might not be able to make it to attendance-based classes in bad weather.

For Zerby, there was a transition in terms of leading a “regular life” and a college life.

Running a business at a young age, Zerby was used to long hours and late nights. However, things are different a decade later.

“Let me tell ya, all-nighters at 36? That’s rough!” he says.

Other challenges include aspects young freshmen today wouldn’t think about. Zerby doesn’t use a complicated graphing calculator.

“I struggle because I don’t know how to punch stuff into a calculator,” he says. “When I was a kid, you would be expelled from school if caught using a calculator. They were this new evil technology that was considered cheating.” He’s still adjusting to the exams handed out today, which assume everybody is using a calculator.

Other issues for non-traditional students Haacke mentions include finding affordable family-friendly housing. The learning community has also talked about developing an orientation session catered towards non-traditional students.

At the end of the day, these students are content about making a major decision.

“I am glad I made that leap to quit my job and go back to school,” Gyulafia says. 📍

ANTS: Adults and Non-traditional Students Learning Community

This learning community aims to serve older students and those from non-traditional backgrounds at the College of Human Sciences. In the past, the group has organized meetings, lunches and organized for peer-mentors. According to the community’s blog, the group was started in 1986 by a counselor in the student counseling services office who felt a need to have such a group on campus. Non-traditional students can be referred to the group by their academic advisors.

Who is an adult or non-traditional student?

- Adult students are aged 25 and above.
- Non-traditional students can be adult students or those commuting, married, raising children or serving in the National Guard, among others.